

## A CHRISTMAS CAROL IN TORONTO (2008)

**I**n Charles Dickens' classic novel *"A Christmas Carol"*, Scrooge is approached by two gentlemen seeking to raise a charitable fund for a Christmas meal for poor people in Victorian London. Scrooge asks three questions, and then suggests that the "surplus" people should simply die.



Here are Scrooge's questions, and some contemporary answers, from Toronto in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

**“Are there no prisons,” asked Scrooge.**

The number of homeless admissions to adult jails in Toronto grew by 68% from 296 in 2001 to 496 in 2004

[1].

**“And the Union workhouses, are they still in operation?”**

Toronto's hostels provided 1.377 million bed nights of emergency shelter (3,770 per night, 365 days a year) in 2008[2].

**“The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour?”**

Toronto Police issued 10,584 tickets under the *Safe Streets Act* to people asking others for change, in 2007 – up 288% from 2004[3].

**“I help to support the establishments that I have mentioned: they cost enough: and those who are badly off must go there,” says Scrooge. “Many can't go there, and many would rather die.” “If they would rather die, they had better do it and decrease the surplus population...”**

The poorest one-fifth of Toronto men has a standardized mortality rate 54% higher than the richest one-fifth[4]. The rate of premature death for poor women is only slightly less: 34% higher for the poor than the rich.

Michael Shapcott, Director of Community Engagement, The Wellesley Institute

[1] Novac, Sylvia et al, *A Revolving Door? Homeless People and the Justice System in Toronto*, University of Toronto Centre for Urban and Community Studies, Research Bulletin #36, July 2007.

[2] Analysts' Notes, *City of Toronto Budget 2008*, February 2008.

[3] General Manager, Support, Support and Housing Administration, report to City of Toronto Executive Committee, April 21, 2008.

[4] Toronto Public Health, *The Unequal City*, October, 2008.